

# Clay Palm Press: A Technique of Hand Building in Ceramics for Developing Conceptual Forms

Okewu E. Jonathan

**Abstract**—There are several techniques of production in the field of ceramics. These different techniques overtime have been categorised under three methods of production which includes; casting, throwing and hand building. Hand building method of production is further broken down into other techniques and they include coiling, slabbing and pinching. Ceramic artists find the different hand building techniques to be very interesting, practicable and rewarding. This has encouraged ceramic artist in their various studios at different levels to experiment for further hand building techniques that could be unique and unusual. The art of “*Clay Palm Press*” is a development from studio experiment in a quest for uniqueness in conceptual ceramic practise. Clay palm press is a technique that requires no formal tutelage but at the same time, it is not easily comprehensible when viewed. It is a practice of putting semi-solid clay in the palm and inserting a closed fist pressure so as to take the imprint of the human palm. This clay production from the palm when dried, fired and explored into an art, work reveals an absolute awesomeness of what the palm imprint could result in.

**Keywords**—Ceramics, clay palm press, conceptual forms, hand building, technique.

## I. INTRODUCTION

CLAY is known to be an earthy plastic malleable substance. It is soft when wet but hard and rocklike when fired to a high temperature [3]. In the plastic state it is capable of receiving any impression or shape and retains it [6]. Clay’s quality has made the material to be of immense importance in the field of ceramics. It yields itself to all manner of shaping techniques that are formal and informal, making it possible to generate forms of utility as well as conceptual or interrogative. More recently, ceramic artists have developed an insatiable taste for experimenting into realms of developing unique ways of handling clay for advancement and to satisfy ones inquisitiveness.

This study dwells on the conceptual aspect of ceramics that is limitless and not bound by any formal rule to showcase a studio experiment that is a direct product of the imprint of the human palm. This method of production no doubt falls under the manual method of production in ceramics because it entails to tool or machine. In as much as this technique can be categorized under the manual method of production, it is quite different from other forms of manual methods of production as presented in ceramic literature which include, pinching, coiling and slabbing. Though a definite nomenclature has not been assigned to this unique technique, it is in no way the same as or close to any of the formal manual methods of

ceramics production. For the purpose of this study, “*clay palm press*” has been used to describe the process and hope that a more ideal name will be discovered for this enterprise.

## II. PRODUCTION METHODS IN CERAMICS

According to [3], “the art of pot making is an old craft practised all over the world and has three main methods of production namely: *Hand building, wheel pottery and casting*”. Gukas and Datiri further state that these three methods however have some slight unique local variations in their shaping and production techniques. Reference [5] opines that “Because ancient people made their pots and clay figures by hand processes thousands of years before the potter’s wheel was developed, it is easy to assume that hand building techniques are simple”. Peterson and Peterson disclose that this is not necessary so, because understanding clay and its movement in the wet to dry stage, together with its physical and chemical changes in the kiln fire, is a prerequisite to building large and small forms in clay by hand. This is the most instinctive and private method of potting that gives some good training in manipulative co-ordination and the sense of form. Although it is a difficult method to master, very large noble and beautiful pots have been and are still being made by this method though with some slightly different local variations in cultural techniques. Gukas and Datiri [3] further reveal some of these techniques with explanations below:

The pinch technique is the most primitive technique in which pots are made by hollowing out a cavity in a small ball of clay. The wall of the pot is made thinner by squeezing the ball between the thumb and the fingers round and round as the ball of clay rotates in the palm of the other hand. For a successful pinch pot of equal thickness all through, the thinning process must be from the base of the pot in a slow and spiral movement upwards. Pots made in this way are usually very small, but can be made bigger by joining some basic bowl shapes which have been made in the same way so as to get a somewhat round complex form.

The coil technique is the most common and probably the oldest and the best for general use. It works well for both small and large pots. To start a piece of pottery in this technique, a small ball of clay is rolled either on a table or between the hands until a long roll of clay about the thickness of the finger next to the index finger is made. A pot is started by winding the coils one on top of the other, from the beginning to look like the base of a snail shell. The position of each additional coil has a lot to do with the shaping of the pot. This technique is continued until the needed shape and size is reached.

Okewu E. Jonathan is with the Department of Visual and Creative Arts, Federal University Lafia (e-mail: okewu.jonathan@filafia.edu.ng).

On slabbing technique, [5] explains that “slab technique allows slabs to be rolled or thrown flat and then luted together or used large, formed in one piece. For reproduction or similar copies of the same piece, or for aesthetic reasons, plastic clays can be formed mechanically by process such as extrusion – forcing clay slab through a die – or jiggering – pressing a clay slab between a metal template which is attached to an arm on an electric wheel and a plaster mold rotated on the wheel”. The conventional production methods that have been recorded in literature are not absolute in themselves. Human tastes are insatiable, that is the reason why technologies keep changing and improving. This also affects the field of ceramics. Ceramists are no longer comfortable with the over stretched production methods in the area but seek for more ways of manipulating clay in developing ceramic forms that are creative and could be unique in attempt to generating conceptual ceramic forms or ceramic art.

### III. CONCEPTUAL CERAMICS

Clay palm press as produced in this study are little individual clay forms that can be appropriated for different kinds of ceramic art works depending on one’s favoured format of expression in ceramics. Particular to this study, the little segmented clay forms are fashioned for ceramic art works that are both in the round and on two-dimensional surface that could be referred to as conceptual ceramics. Ceramics has a long historical background and it followed a rugged path after the 19<sup>th</sup> century Industrial Revolution in Britain. Ceramic art is not only decorative and of plastic value anymore, it catches a conceptual language with the works of contemporary artists. Ceramic artists during the post-modern period produced conceptual works by interpreting traditional and historical items. Reference [8] opines that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ceramic art has been accepted as an artistic discipline. Conceptual art works were created by contemporary ceramic artists’ interpretations. In ceramic art history, conceptual art has an important place because of enabling of creating ceramic art works that stands against the traditional and the modernist style. When we look at the relationship between conceptual apprehension and ceramic art, we see that the structural features of ceramic material support conceptual expressions. Reference [1] describes conceptual ceramics as ‘non-pot ceramics’. With bias for traditional (conventional) ceramics, Alkali enumerates the merits of conceptual ceramics to include a high level of intellectual content that brings about a rich confluence of inspirations and subject matters that become exciting sources of information to other aspects of learning. He further states that, this kind of ceramics proclaims the modern era in a variety of ways. It produces works that speak about contemporary issues in day to day life, thus offering great conceptual framework upon which academic discussion could be generated.

### IV. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts the studio based research approach for convenience in the actualisation of the aim, since art in itself is

a form of research. Art, like traditional research, is a form of documentation that collects information and builds upon knowledge [2]. One advantage of art as a form of research is its ability to present material that is more evocative rather than denotative, unlike traditional research. This may lead to further questions, interpretations, and explorations creating a more complex picture of the information (Eisner in [2]). First, as the Artist, one is involved in creating a work of art. Second, as the Researcher, one may explore various avenues of research. The subject matter as well as art creation may represent a form of research [2]. According to [7], “the imaginative and intellectual work undertaken by artists is a form of research”. Apparently, this means that the exploratory individuations, the social and cultural inquiry the visual arts have, the critical, creative investigations that occur in studios, galleries, on the internet, in community spaces, and in other places where artists work are legitimate forms of research grounded in art practice.

Secondary clay was the primary material for generating the forms. Clay gotten from the field was slaked in a bin for two days to allow for proper dissolving of the clay. The clay in slurry form was sieved to do away with extraneous objects that could be detrimental to the process of production. The sieved clay was poured on a porous floor surface for dewatering into semi-solid form. The semi-solid clay was kneaded for consistency before production. The two human palms are the tools that were directly used to produce the clay forms for this study. The kneaded clay was pinched and dropped in the middle of the palm depending on the size of clay form desired (see Figs. 1 and 2). The pinched clay in the palm was rolled into with the help of the second palm into string of clay (see Figs. 3 and 4). To achieve the desired form, the string of clay was tightly covered with the fist for the imprint of the fists to be transferred on the string of clay (see Figs. 5 and 6). The process of pinching the clay, rolling the clay with both palms into string, and compressing the clay with the fists to transfer the imprint of the fists onto the clay was repeated over and over again until the desired quantity was achieved. The green wares produced were placed on a flat board and allowed to dry care-freely into bone dried state. At bone dried state, the wares were parked into the kiln and fired at different temperature (see Fig. 7). Firing under different temperatures allowed for various colour variations to make the outcome more pleasing. The fired clay pieces at this point need a supporting surface or structure to rest on for exploration. This supporting structure could be in a three-dimensional structure or two-dimensional surface in as much as the palm press clay pieces could conveniently rest on and be able to make a statement. A three-dimensional oval shaped plastic structure had been provided in this study, on which the clay pieces were arranged and glued on to (see Fig. 8). Clay palm press pieces were arranged in different patterns and directions on the plastic structure, and this was carried out to cover the entire body of the plastic. At some instance, negative spaces were left to create variety and deeper conceptuality of the art work. “A and B” adhesive was used to attach the pieces of clay to the plastic surface (see Fig. 9). Three-dimensional

and two-dimensional conceptual works were produced with this style of clay manipulation (see Figs. 10 and 11). These works are deliberately untitled not because the artist lacks titles or conceptual explanation for the works but to allow for different perception and contributions from enthusiasts.



Fig. 1 Pinching the semi-solid clay



Fig. 2 Positioning the clay in the palm



Fig. 3 Rolling the clay into a desired shape



Fig. 4 Positioning the rolled clay at the root of the fingers



Fig. 5 Compressing the clay in the fist to transfer the imprint of the fingers onto it



Fig. 6 Releasing the compressed clay to reveal the outcome



Fig. 7 Fired clay palm press in the kiln



Fig. 8 Oval plastic structure as support for carrying the clay pieces



Fig. 9 Arranging and gluing the clay pieces to cover the plastic surface



Fig. 10 Untitled, 2017, terracotta, 65cm/ 45cm/ 45cm



Fig. 11 Untitled, 2017, terracotta, 46cm/ 46cm

## V. DISCUSSION

The conceptual ceramic forms produced is analysed based on the formalistic analyses advocated by [4]. "The goal of a

formal analysis of art work is to explain how the formal elements of a work of art affect the representation of the subject matter and expressive content. The emphasis should be on analysing the formal elements not interpreting the artwork. That said, an understanding of the meaning of the work is the final goal of any formal analysis". Hamilton College enumerates formal elements in analysing sculptural works to include:

- in the round vs. relief
- directionality
- shape (organic vs. geometric)
- material
- texture
- volume
- light and shadow
- colour
- technique (additive vs. subtractive)

The conceptual clay works produced (see Figs. 10 and 11) are both in the round and in two-dimensional forms. In Plate 10 is presented in an oval three-dimensional shape for viewing from all sides. It is a suspended art form that is hanging with the help of fishing line. The art works bear cut out spaces in different shapes that are like a map of different continents of the world. These cuts are to allow for viewing into the work to see the inner manipulations. The clay pieces on the exterior from a little distance that looks like groundnuts, while at a closer inspection, individual clay pieces look like the skeletal bones of human fingers. Plate 11 is in two-dimensional square form that can only be viewed from one direction. Broken pieces of clay ware have been used in collaboration with the palm press clay pieces to suggest a force breaking through from the ground in the form of a plant germination. The clay pieces here have been made in varied terracotta colour variations. This is to create variety and to make the appearance of the work to be aesthetically appealing. The art works present hard looking and rough textures in a recurring style. The play of light and shade on the works has further enhanced the quality of the individual clay forms that has been used to generate the art works. There is an intentional variation of the terracotta colour value of the clay forms. Some are in dark value while others are in lighter value. The different values have been used to create a sense of negative and positive spaces on the works there by resulting in pleasing and aesthetic effects.

## VI. FINDINGS

- Patiently studying, working and experimenting on the medium clay in uncommon fashions, has resulted in a new dimension in the production methods of hand building in ceramics.
- The human palm in itself is a mould with intricate and interesting patterns that has just been explored for conceptual ceramic forms.
- Pieces of clay forms produced from this uncommon method of hand building have proven to be suitable for both works in the round and flat surfaces. It is suitable, not only for conceptual forms, but also it can be used as



decorations on different surfaces for enhancement.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Clay palm press hand building technique as exemplified in this study proved that the traditional hand building method of ceramics are just a starting point for other methods to be developed. Just like the explorative opportunity that lies in the handling of clay is endless, the methods of production in ceramics too could be endless as far as ceramic artists in their private and public studios are constantly working and experimenting.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Alkali C. V. (2009). The Evolution of the Practice of “Non-Pot” Ceramics in Nigeria: Merits and Demerits, in *Ashakwa Journal of Ceramics*, Vol. 6. pp. 19-26.
- [2] Byrd D. M. (2014). Research-Based Studio Art as a Strategy to Support Interdisciplinary Learning. M. A. Thesis (Unpublished). College of Arts and Sciences Georgia State University, United States of America. [http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/art\\_design\\_theses/167](http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/art_design_theses/167).
- [3] Gukas H. J. and Datiri Y. C. (2001). *The Art of Pottery*. C. C. Communication, Jos.
- [4] Hamilton College (2014). Writing a Formal Analysis in Art History. Retrieved from <https://www.hamilton.edu/documents/formal%20analysis%20Art%20History.pdf>.
- [5] Peterson S. and Peterson J. (2013). *The Craft and Art of Clay: A Complete Potter's Handbook*. Lawrence King Publishing, London.
- [6] Shinde V. and Shirvalkar P. (2009). Ceramic Production Techniques. Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute, Deccan College Post-Graduate and Research Institute (Deemed University), Pune. Retrieved 9 November, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42931193>.
- [7] Sullivan, G. (2005). *Art Practice as Research, Inquiry in the Visual Arts*. London: Sage Publications. pp. xi-xv, 5.
- [8] Ozer G. (2012), Conceptual Approaches in Contemporary Ceramic Art, ATINER's. Conference Paper Series ART2012-0105. Retrieved from <http://www.atiner.gr/papers/ART2012-0105.pdf>.